

## Part III

# Plato's Theory of the Forms



# Chapter 10

## Introduction: why the Forms?

### 10.1 Readings and Homework

- Readings:
  - Article “Universals” on the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy
  - Not mandatory, but an excellent reference for the remaining of the course on Plato: Article “Plato’s Middle Period Metaphysics and Epistemology” on the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy
- Study Questions:
  1. With what kind of beings are universals generally contrasted?
  2. What problem is supposed to be solved by postulating the existence of universals?
  3. What new problems arise from the postulation of the existence of universals?
  4. What are the possible alternatives?

### 10.2 Metaphysics and Epistemology

In formulating his theory of the Forms, Plato formulated the first theory of what we call universals (the name come from the Middle Ages). The notion of universal is a **technical notion in metaphysics**.

- Definitions

- **Epistemology**: roughly, theory of what knowledge is and of how we reach it.

- The main question in epistemology is: What can we know and how?

- Knowledge**: justified true belief – contrast with false belief AND with non-justified true belief, i.e. **opinion**.

- **Metaphysics** : on what there is, and the forms of being

- The main question in metaphysics is: what to take in our inventory of the world? That is to say, what kinds of things exist and what kind of being do they have?

- Our views on metaphysics and epistemology are linked to one another:

- Our views on what we know and how depends on our views on what we think exists. For example, if you believe that there is a God who implements mathematical and logical notions in your brain at birth, then you can hold that you can do mathematics and logics by intuition.

- Conversely, our views on what exists depends on our views on what we know and how. For example, if your view is that all knowledge comes from experimental observation, then you can hold that we cannot ascertain the existence of non-observable entities such as electrons and quarks.

## 10.3 Plato and his intellectual fathers: the road to the forms

### 10.3.1 Heraclitus vs. Parmenides: how to save the possibility of knowledge

- Truth conditions and reference

- Reminder distinction proposition/sentence: a proposition is capable of truth or falsity

- Consider the proposition:

- ‘Jalisco is black’

How do we assess whether such a proposition is true or not?

‘Jalisco’ **refers** to a certain cat that we can observe

‘black’ **refers** to a color that we can observe

These referents + the structure of the propositions give the proposition its **meaning**. Once a proposition is meaningful, one can assess whether it is true or false.

We say that: ‘Jalisco is black’ (the proposition) is true if and only if Jalisco is black.

Easy enough...

- **Falsity**

Compare:

- ‘Jalisco is white’ – is false because ascribe a property to Jalisco (who exists) which she does not possess

- ‘Santa Claus lives in the North Pole’ False? How do we know: it does not refer to anything! According to our theory of meaning above, such sentences are *meaningless*!

Now, we have a problem concerning the *truth conditions* for propositions containing non-existent entities (At least the Greek had such a problem: we have a different solution in our times). *Proposition containing terms that do not refer to anything existing are not capable of truth or falsity – hence they are not propositions at all!*

- **Metaphysics in Ancient Greece:** what are the fundamental constituents of the world ?

- Thales: water

- Anaximenes: air

- **Heraclitus: there is no fundamental constituent of the world but CHANGE.**

cf. You can never step into the same river twice.

Heraclitus can be said to be an **empiricist**: he believes that all knowledge, if we are capable of any, comes from experience. All we have is our senses. Now, our senses indicate that everything changes all the

time. For example, while Jalisco once was completely black, she now has some gray hair here and there. Over the course of our lives, we renew completely our set of biological cells: how can we be still “the same”? According to Heraclitus, nothing (neither Jalisco or any of us) remains the same, and identity is an illusion.

**The result: no secured true knowledge is possible.** By the time you state a proposition, the referents have changed and your proposition does not talk about anything anymore. Think about something that changes quickly: for example, the color of the lake: by the time you assert that the lake is blue, it has turned green. Heraclitus thinks that this problems applies to everything, everywhere and all the time. By the time you assert ‘Jalisco is black’, what you called Jalisco does not exist anymore and your proposition is meaningless.

- **Parmenides and Cratylus: Change is illusion**

- The fundamental constituent of the world is an unchanging being – ‘substance’ = what remains under the change
- Senses are deceitful
- Change is illusory: it is not
- One cannot talk meaningfully about what is not. Given that our sense perceptions do not give us the real thing, our propositions about what our sense perceptions are meaningless.
- Hence, ‘Jalisco is black’ is not meaningful (relies on senses) and is not capable of truth or falsity.
- At the end of the day, all we can meaningfully say is: ‘what is is’

- **What about math and logic?**

Mathematical notions do not change. The proposition ‘a square has four sides’ seems to be escape the problems above. Even if we admit that no knowledge is possible concerning our changing sense impressions (whether change is illusory or not does not matter: in both case, it is impossible to gain knowledge of the sensible things), maybe we are capable of knowledge concerning mathematical and logical notions.

Pythagores: the fundamental constituents of the world are mathematical figures and number. Knowledge is possible but is solely mathematical.

- **Mathematical propositions: the problem of reference**

Consider the following proposition:

‘a square is a four equal rectangle’

What are its truth condition? If we want to apply the same method as with ‘Jalisco is black’, then we have to have *referents* at least for ‘square’ and ‘rectangle’, maybe for ‘equal sides’ and ‘four’ as well.

Can we find squares, equality, and rectangles among the sensible things ? No

SO: If we want mathematical knowledge to be possible, it seems that we have to postulate the existence of non-sensible squares, equal sides and rectangles etc.

This is the idea behind Plato’s postulation of the FORMS: the forms are these non-sensible things to which true propositions refer.

### 10.3.2 The crucial domain of ethics

The problem of knowledge becomes crucial when we consider the ethical realm.

- Remember the Socratic question: What is X?

Socrates requires a definition of X as the only appropriate answer. Such of definition of X must be essential, intentional, objective and explanatory.

- Applied to Ethics, the problem is crucial:

The issue is whether there is an objective right and wrong, an objective notion of Justice, courage, moderation etc.

*If there is no objective ethical notions, then the propositions concerning ethics cannot be said to be true or false.* They lack appropriate truth conditions. In this case, the sophist, i.e. conventionalism wins !

Plato wants proposition concerning ethics to be meaningful, and consequently, to be capable of truth or falsity. He wants that we possess clear truth conditions for statements like: ‘Socrates is a just man’, or ‘justice is good’

His idea: ethical propositions are similar to mathematical propositions: they refer to non-sensible forms.

## 10.4 The problem of universals

Plato and his theory of the Forms launches the controversy over the “Universals”. The theory of universals applies the foregoing ideas about mathematical and ethical notions to a larger set of things: not only ‘justice’, but also ‘black’ exists.

### 10.4.1 The problem of universals

- **Universals are to be contrasted with particulars:**
  - Particulars are “**obvious**” **things** in the inventory of the world: this particular chair now. Obvious particulars (Not numbers or Gods) are material, situated at a point of space-time, unique. They can be pointed at.
  - Particulars can be also characterized by **a set of properties** or qualities. These qualities are *shared* between different particulars. For example, all chairs are solid (solid enough to hold you at least).
- Does it not seem that “there is” something like ”**solidness**” ?
  - “Solidness” is shared by many particulars: pretty all the chairs that deserve the name of chair are solid.
  - “Solidness” is not affected by what happens to these chairs that all share it. Destroy a chair, solidness still ”is” (you might try to argue that without any solid particulars, solidness would not ”be”, but this already taking part)

The notion of universals aims at capturing those qualities that are shared by multiple particulars.

The so-called “problem of universal” is just this: How to give an account of the qualitative similarities between quantitatively different individuals? Postulating the existence of the universals is an answer to this problem.

### 10.4.2 The problems with universals

- Now, if you take the universals in your inventory of beings, the questions are:



**1. Metaphysics: What sort of being, if any, have universals?**

A major problem consists in explaining how universals can “be”, and fully be, at different place at the same time.

**2. Metaphysics: What is their relationship to the particulars?**

A major problem consists in the fact that these relations do not seem to be understandable in terms of the usual causation, because universal do not seem to be material.

**3. Epistemology: What is *our* relation to these universals? That is, how can we know them?**

For the same reason of immateriality, it seems difficult to understand how universals can interact with our brains.

- The possible positions (this is obviously rough):
  - Metaphysics:
    - realism – universals exist
    - nominalism – only individuals exist
    - conceptualism – individuals exist and concepts are in our minds
  - Epistemology:
    - rationalism
    - empiricism

## EXAMPLE OF THE TRIANGLE

**10.5 How to choose our metaphysics?**

In other words, how can we decide what to accept in our inventory of the world?

- Compare with physics. Why do we postulate unobservable (and often weird) entities?

In general, one postulates theoretical entities as the better *answer* to a given set of questions. The question of why postulate the existence of universals thus amounts to the following: are there any philosophical problems that are best solved by this postulation?

We will see to what other problems the postulation of the existence of platonic forms are meant to solve. Here, in the *Meno*, the forms (or at least something innate like reasoning ability) are a condition of possibility of our abilities to reason a priori.

To be continued....